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SUBJECT: MEPN: Multilateral Working Group on Water

Resources: Meeting of the Regional Water Data Banks Project Steering Committee

1. The Steering Committee for the Middle East Regional Water Data Banks project (known by the acronym EXACT - Executive Action Team) met November 29-December 1 in Brussels for one of its semi-annual meetings. Representatives from the USG, Israel, the Palestinian Authority, Jordan and three other donors (EU, UK, and The Netherlands) participated. The Data Banks project has operated continuously since it was established in 1995, even throughout the five years of the Intifada, and EXACT has met 22 times. It now enjoys strong joint leadership from the core parties of Israel, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority. Their focus for the next several years will be on training. End summary.

Participants

2. NEA Senior Advisor for Science and Technology Dr. Charles Lawson chaired the Brussels meeting. Palestinian Water Authority Director Fadel Kawash, Israeli MFA Acting Deputy Director General for the Middle East Yacov Keidar, and Jordanian Ministry of Water and Irrigation Assistant Secretary General Fayez Bataineh represented the core

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parties. European Union, UK, and Dutch officials, as active donors to the Data Banks project, participated, as did their technical consultants. France, which has supported project activities in the past, did not participate; although France committed earlier this year to support a new activity, it has not been able to secure funding for it. Australia and Switzerland have expressed interest in supporting project activities but similarly have not yet found funds to do so.

Regional Training Initiative to Set Framework

3. A major new focus of the Data Banks project driven by core parties' expressed interest is the Regional Training Initiative. Palestinian Water Authority Director Kawash made a strong pitch for the Regional Training Initiative, noting that the Palestinian Authority not only needs training but also needs the regional cooperation and exposure to new ideas and new technologies that the Regional Training Initiative would provide. U.S. representative and meeting Chair Lawson said that the USG is prepared to contribute expertise towards the development of the initiative's implementation plan and to support training activities identified in such a plan.

4. The Training Initiative implementation plan will first assess current capacity, evaluate needs, and then lay out a framework for delivering training to address gaps and shortfalls. While the USG will support a number of training activities, the core parties should be able to use the plan to engage the support of additional donors as well. The framework would identify the types of training needed, the appropriate recipients, who would give the training, information sources, the best means for providing training, and other specifics.

5. Palestinian Water Authority Director Fadel Kawash suggested several times that study tours would be a useful component of a training framework. Israeli delegate Moshe Yisraeli commented that training should go into more depth on certain issues and generate some continuity, rather than continuously starting new projects and new topics. An "outside the box" idea was to provide training on presentation skills (e.g. making a presentation at a meeting), since people who are called on to do this may be inexperienced and uncomfortable in public speaking.

Donor Reports on Wide Range of Water Projects

6. Donor countries reported on their particular Data Banks project activities. These projects can include expert visits, training sessions, provision of hardware, and development of databases and software tools. Management of wastewater was highlighted several times as a difficult and important issue from both the pollution prevention aspect and from its status as an underexploited water source.

European Union (EU) representatives outlined several EU water projects being done in the Middle East and Mediterranean region.

17. A list of projects currently supported by donors includes:  
\*\* water treatment (decontamination),  
\*\* artificial recharge of aquifers from surface water,  
\*\* development of a decision support system for optimizing wastewater treatment,  
\*\* groundwater modeling,  
\*\* developing a monitoring network and baseline data for wastewater quality,  
\*\* flood prediction,  
\*\* rainfall intensity,  
\*\* water harvesting,  
\*\* qualitative management of aquifers threatened by pollution and salinization,  
\*\* a water sample testing program,  
\*\* movement of water through aquifers, and  
\*\* the impact of wastewater on water quality, with an eye towards pollution prevention and remediation.

Some Bumps in the Road  
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18. Several core party representatives made the point on multiple occasions that the presence of both diplomatic and technical consulting personnel in the region, as opposed to being located in European capitals, makes the projects much more effective, since problems can be identified and solved more quickly. While the core parties are very pleased with the progress of Data Banks project activities, some problems do exist. They include a lack of coordination between the donor and the core party, a lack of internal coordination by a core party or a donor, budgetary shortfalls, logistical problems with Customs authorities or with incorrectly specified procurement, delays with bid tenders, a lack of access due to security issues, and scheduling difficulties.

Participants Also Discuss Broader Issues  
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19. In addition to discussing specific projects, EXACT also provides a forum for multilateral discussion of broader water issues. Israeli representative Keidar suggested that the time might be ripe for restarting the Water Working Group of the Multilateral Peace Process, perhaps with an informal meeting of interested parties or a steering committee meeting. U.S. rep Lawson gave a brief overview of the U.S.-supported Middle East Desalination Research Center based in Muscat, Oman. Palestinian Water Authority Director Kawash also said that he hopes to see other regional countries like Syria and Lebanon join EXACT. Following the EXACT meeting, the core parties visited the European Commission and the Council of Europe to describe EXACT to high-level groups.

EXACT Website to be Managed by Israeli Water Commission  
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110. Prior to the plenary session of EXACT, the core parties met as a group, the donor countries met separately as a group, and following those meetings, there were bilateral consultations between individual donors and individual core parties.

111. One result of the core party consultations was that the Israel Water Commission agreed to host the EXACT website (<http://exact-me.org> - note: no WWW prefix), currently hosted on U.S. Geological Survey computers. With the retirement of USGS stalwarts Anna Lenox and Bill Shampine, management of EXACT has migrated from USGS to USDA. For many years, the USG has urged the core parties to take over management of the website and have the server in the region. The Israeli Water Commission has agreed to host the website.

112. Comment: EXACT is a clear example of U.S. leadership, commitment and seed money bringing Israelis, Palestinians and Jordanians together - and engaging other donors - to make a real contribution to quality of life and to peace in the Middle East.

HALE